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AUTHOR Beyer, Thomas R., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Recently several persons involved with language study in the U.S.S.R. have publicly voiced concerns on the value of summer programs for American students there. The proliferation of these programs in the last ten years calls for a reexamination of what students who study in the Soviet Union are expected to achieve. By examining the expectations of students and how they have developed versus the reality of study in the Soviet Union, and the intentions of faculty versus the actual achievements of students, two issues are brought into focus. Why should students be sent to the Soviet Union? What should be demanded of a program before it is recommended to students? At the present time there are clearly substantial differences of opinion between students who wish free time to participate in their Russian experience and professors who place greater emphasis on academic excellence. Nonetheless, a synthesis of the opposing viewpoints may be found in recent innovative theories of "communicative competence," "lingvostranovedenie" and "culture." These concepts provide new justification for faculty support of overseas programs and offer new areas for the evaluation of student progress made in the U.S.S.R. At the same time, these concepts represent a framework within which can be placed those programs which consitute a balanced diet of academic pursuits and cultural interaction. (Author/CFM)

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Thomas R Beyer, Jr

Middlebury College

The C.I.E.E. Summer Program in Leningrad:

How Can They Study When the Nights Are White?

In October 1977 at the Annual Convention of the A.A.A.S.S., Richard Thompson of the U.S. Office of Education speaking in a panel discussion of American language programs in the Soviet Union raised the following questions: What are the purposes and goals of these programs, and do not undergraduates who comprise the majority of participants in such programs lack clear direction and commitments? Mr. Thompson is not alone; he joins the small but growing ranks of persons interested in or involved with language study in the U.S.S.R. who have publicly voiced concerns on the value of such programs. A good friend and colleague, Professor Gerald Mikkelson, recently expressed his disappointments and frustrations, as well as constructive suggestions for the future of the Russian Language Program at Leningrad State University.[1] Professor Robert Baker was one of the first to voice similar misgivings on the quality and effectiveness of the academic aspects of such programs several years ago.[2] The issues addressed by Professors Mikkelson and Baker are indications of a

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responsible and timely reevaluation of our own field and, in particular, a reexamination of what we intend and hope to achieve with our students. Indeed, some thought on the original premises for the creation of such programs is required if only on the basis of the literal explosion and uncontrolled proliferation of language programs in the U.S.S.R. which we have witnessed in the last ten ten years. The expansion of opportunities to study in Moscow or Leningrad is the classical response of the free market to the rising demands of consumers -- our students. One might well ask if this desire to satisfy student demands has not resulted in a lessening of the quality control, which we in the profession have the responsibility to exercise. Another question we might pose is what do the students really want and expect from a language program in the Soviet Union? Because at the present time it would be difficult for any one individual to provide an informed and objective overview of all existing programs, I have decided to rely primarily on my own limited, though somewhat unique, experiences with one of these programs.

In 1967 I was a student participant in the first C.I.E.E. (then C.S.T.) summer program at Leningrad State University. Subsequently, I served as an assistant group leader in 1969, and as the group leader for the University of Kansas contingent of C.I.E.E. in the summer of 1975. The most fascinating aspect of this experience was the ability to

observe and appreciate the considerable differences in their perspectives between the undergraduate student and the professor of Russian. By examining the expectations of students and how they have developed in the past ten years versus the reality of study in the Soviet Union and the intentions of faculty versus the actual achievements of our students, I hope to bring into focus two issues. Why should we send our students to the Soviet Union? What should we demand of a program before recommending it to our students?

In the spring of 1967 I was a sophomore completing third year intensive Russian at the School of Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University. Having absolutely no idea of the the quality of the various competing programs, I fortuitously and fortunately applied and was accepted to the C.S.T. summer program in Moscow, which was later moved to Leningrad. At that time I had only one concern: to go to Russia. My desire was based on the premise (now considered naive and idealistic in some quarters) that by speaking with Russians, sharing a better understanding with them of our respective cultures and experiencing Soviet life at first hand, that this would be one small step on the road to world peace and international cooperation. Genevra Gerhart recently wrote: "This argument is used by foreign language pushers grasping at straws as they sink in the quicksand of public non-acceptance and non-support."[3]

I strongly disagree. I am even more firmly convinced today that direct contact and conversation with Russians in their own language and the ability to experience the fullness and complexity of Soviet society by means of language are essential elements in the preparation of any expert who hopes to deal effectively with the Russians, whether that be a business representative for an American corporation in Moscow, or an advisor to the President on national security matters, or a professor of Russian literature trying to convey the magic and mystery of a Dostoevskian novel.

Another, though admittedly minor, concern when I was a student was to improve my Russian so as to be better able to participate in those discussions which would further my progress toward my stated goals. This desire to speak and understand Russian is not to be confused with any firm conviction on my part that this could be best achieved in the traditional classroom. Actually, I recall with some delight, that at the time I had no real appreciation of any academic aspect of the program. Somewhere in the large packet of orientation materials, now long discarded, there must have been information stating that instruction would be given and that attendance at classes and lectures was expected; but this thought was most probably relegated to the subconscious and largely obscured by the more attractive activities to be offerred. My motto at the time was : "Don't let college interfere with your education." As you might

suspect, I was severely disappointed and frustrated by the lack of free time to search out and find the "real Russians."

Have students changed since 1967? To a large degree the idealism of my generation has been replaced by the cynicism and pragmatism of a student body worried about employment after graduation. Few members in my group in 1975 would have felt comfortable in expressing their intent to further the cause of world peace. Rather, they seemed interested in improving their Russian in order to enhance their professional qualifications and consequently their marketability. As students they were far more conscientious than those of us in 1967, and they were certainly more grade conscious. I still cannot understand how some students could spend the evening in their room studying instead of enjoying a walk along the banks of the Neva when the White Nights alone appear to be sufficient justification for Peter's selection of a site for his new capital. Nontheless, the students still valued personal contacts as more meaningful and useful than time spent in class.

Opposed to the view of students, although not insensitive to their motivations, faculty members have placed far greater emphasis on academic excellence. Educators hoped that intensive language study supported by total and genuine cultural immersion would produce fluency in the language for their students. Or as one student remarked to me in 1975:

"My professors told me that they could do nothing more for my Russian." Unfortunately, neither could the Soviet instructors. Some of the disappointments voiced by members of the profession are centered in the inability of these programs to improve substantially language skills as they are traditionally measured. On a more practical and mundane level, faculty group leaders have assumed a modified in loco parentis posture, in which they have been primarily responsible for attendance at classes and lectures, and have tried to insure that no one missed the train to Moscow or the bus to Novgorod, etc.

While it might seem that the positions of students and professors are essentially antithetical and almost irreconciliable, recent developments in the profession provide concepts which serve well as a synthesis of these opposing views. Three expressions which seem to be in fashion today are "communicative competence," "lingvostranovedenie" and "culture with a small and big 'c'." While educators have just as it were embraced the first, I suspect that what we were doing as students in 1967 was improving our communicative competence. Certainly we were far more concerned with the message or load than with the form or code of our utterances. Often we, as do students today, had the impression that those who demanded our presence at lectures or on excursions and the teachers in the classroom cared far more for how we said

something than for what we said. While students undoubtably support communicative competence in the classroom both at home and abroad, we in the profession should be more cautious. Our chief responsibility in the basic langauage courses should be to concentrate on the correctness of form, allowing for mature expressions of content only after the basics of the language have been mastered. Students in their casual encounters with Soviets have ample opportunity to express their innermost thoughts without the Soviet interrupting with grammatical corrections. While we should seek some accomodation, neither we nor our Soviet colleagues should provide encouragement or positive reinforcement for such sentences as: Ja čitaju gazeta.

One major advantage for students in the Soviet Union is their ability to assimilate cultural-linguistic differences. The work of V. Kostomarov in this field has done much to make this an important issue in language acquisition. Lingvostranovedenie is as he defines it: 'oznakomlenie inostrannyx škol'nikov, studentov, stažerov, izučajuščix russkij jazyk, c sovremennoj sovetskoj dejstvitel'nost'ju, kul'turoj čerez posredstvo russkogo jazyka i v processe ego izučenija."[4] It is in this area where the greatest gains may be made by a prolonged stay in the Soviet Union. Lingvostranovedenie is one topic which can be presented in the classroom and which

is naturally and immediately reinforced in the daily life of the student. Kostomarov comments on a variety of subjects ranging from lexical items, to gestures and practical information, as to how to address a letter. Students in the Soviet Union quickly come to recognize the cultural impact of such words as dežurnaja and družina, and to use judiciously such expressions as: Ex ty, svoloč'. While we are all aware of the difficulty of providing direct lexical equivalents for some Russian words, our students automatically associate lexical items with their cultural context. It is interesting to listen to American students in the Soviet Union conversing in a strange dialect of English. "I'm going to the gastronom for some limonad." Few Americans are willing or able to equate a Soviet gastronom with an American supermarket or limonad with American soft drinks. In such instances, the student's very presence in the Soviet Union is a means of obtaining linguistic as well as cultural information.

Finally, there is the current fascination with culture courses: either little 'c' or big 'c' variety. Genevra Gerhart distinguishes between "'little c' or 'hearthstone' culture, which suggests that we discuss what Russians have for breakfast, daily health routines and 'songs, rhymes and poems,' etc." and "'big c' culture which means traditional, formal categories such as Art, History, Literature

and the like."[5] In these areas, the Soviet experience is a veritable textbook, which no amount of time in the American classroom can replace. We who have been to the Soviet Union often forget that what is so obvious to us is most often a new, exciting and different world for our students No story book readers can substitute for a brief chat with the dežurnaja in a Novgorod museum on the meaning of World War II or with the garderobščik in the Tret'jakovka who willingly sews on coat loops, for men only. Similarly, no slide show or art reproductions in a class on duxovnaja kul'tura can ever hope to achieve the effect of Kuindži's haunting green moon in his Lunnaja noč' na Dnepre displayed in Leningrad's Russkij Muzej. I wonder if we narrow the range of our students' perspectives in our desire to accomodate their demands for more free time. Surely any cultural activity is is preferable to having our students sitting in a room and conjugating verbs of motion.

In light of the unique opportunities available to students who study in the Soviet Union, we as educators, those engaged in leading our students out of their own narrow linguistic and cultural shells, should actively encourage student participation in serious programs. We should also recognize the absolute necessity for integration of formal instruction, scheduled events and free time. Without the linguistic base provided in the academic atmosphere of the classroom, students will lack the tools

for the acquisition of communicative competence and culture. Without free time, how can we expect our students to use the language as a means of communication? Lastly, without scheduled cultural activities, can we ever be assured that some students will leave Leningrad, only having seen the Ermitaž, but unaware of the Russian treasures just a few blocks away at the Russkij muzej? If we wish for this diversification, however, we must realistically revise our own expectations to take the uniqueness of the total experience into account. Because any good program should focus not only on the academic or technical aspects of language learning, we should be prepared to measure progress by standards other than traditional grammar tests. Why should we send our students to the Soviet Union -- because the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The best result is the growth in maturity and understanding, a person with a new awareness of the Russian language and Soviet reality, plus a new appreciation of one's own native culture.

Which programs should we support and recommend? We must seek out those programs which offer a balanced diet of academic excellence, a variety of cultural activities, and sufficient free time in an area where it it is valuable. To insure academic standards we must insist on programs with active participation of American professors to advise and supervise the Soviet staff. To send students on a

on a program with no academic standing is to deceive and and cheat them. Indeed, we must assume that there are some things that eighteen year olds should not and can not be expected to know. Cultural lectures and excursions should also be included as a regular part of the program. Students should be taken to places like Piskarevskoe kladbišče, which they might not find on their own, but without which one cannot fully appreciate the Soviet mind. Likewise, we must insist that our students study Russian in areas where the language learning process is reinforced during free time, i.e. Moscow or Leningrad. Russian is difficult enough without trying to decipher the signs in Ukrainian in Kiev, a nice place to visit, but a horrible setting for Russian classes. I also wonder how useful free time is during an an extended academic stay in Soči, or God forbid, Djuni? The C.I.E.E. program at Leningrad State University is one of only a handful of programs which can meet the above criteria, and I suggest that if you are unfamilar with study opportunities for undergraduates in the Soviet Union that you investigate it more closely.

Language is a system of communication. Any student who works hard enough to learn Russian should have the chance, even if only once, to communicate with people in the Soviet Union. If the level of that communication sometimes falls short of our aspirations for perfection, we can always send our students to graduate school.

N O T E S

[1]Gerald Mikkelson, "Russian Language Study in Leningrad: The CIEE Semester Program," Russian Language Journal, XXXI, 108 (Winter, 1977), pp. 203-210.

[2]Robert L. Baker, "Language Programs in the Soviet Union: Expectations and the Reality," Russian Language Journal, XXIX, 104 (Fall 1975), pp. 37-41.

[3]Genevra Gerhart, "Culture and Communicative Competence," in Stategies for Teaching and Testing Communicative Competence in Russian, ed. Rasio Dunatov (Urabana, Illinois: Russian and East European Center, Univ. of Illinois, 1976), p. 17.

[4]E. M. Vereščagin and V. G. Kostomarov, Jazyk i kul'tura: Lingvostranovedenie v prepodavanii russkogo jazyka kak inostrannogo, 2 ed. (Moscow: Russkij jazyk, 1976), p. 63.

[5]Gerhart, pp. 19, 20.